Saskatchewan
Agriculture
and Food

Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
3085 Albert Street, Regina, Canada, S4S 0B1

Saskatchewan

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Communications Branch, Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food
Contact: Dianna Mallow
101-3085 Albert Street, REGINA, SASKATCHEWAN S4S OB1
Telephone: (306) 787-5160, Fax: (306) 787-0216
Internet Page: http://www.agr.gov.sk.ca

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Log Number: 06-42-191
Week of October 16, 2006

VEGETABLE GROWERS RECORD "BEST EVER" PUMPKIN CROP

You might notice extra-big smiles on the faces of jack o'lanterns around Saskatchewan this Halloween.

That's because vegetable growers in the province report harvesting the best crop of pumpkins many have ever seen.

The 2006 growing season will go down as a banner year for Saskatchewan pumpkin growers. Joan Merrill from Robertson Valley Farms, south of Saskatoon, is just one of the growers with more than a peck of pumpkins in the patch.

"I'd say it surpasses any crop we've had in the past 20 years," said Merrill.

Robertson Valley Farms, a mid-sized pumpkin producer, is growing pumpkins on about five acres of land. The pumpkins are marketed directly to consumers. Merrill doesn't weigh the crop, but she says the size of the pumpkin pile tells the story about this year's harvest. It is huge.

However, she says it is not just the quantity that is good, but also the quality of the crop.

"This year what we have is really good sizing on our pumpkins, plus they turned orange well in advance of harvest. They are in very good condition with hard orange shells, which makes the storability very good for us. So it is excellent quality in addition to quantity and size," said Merrill.

Storability is important for pumpkins, especially for those that are destined to adorn doorsteps on Halloween. Merrill says many people buy their jack o'lanterns early in the season, then store them in the basement until a day or two before Halloween. A hard shell means the pumpkin can be transported safely and last until their big night on October 31. In past seasons, rain in late summer has resulted in disease that caused the shells to break down. But not this year.

According to Merrill, quality plus quantity adds up to a better bottom line for the pumpkin grower.

"It makes for a good pricing on our pumpkins," she noted. "We direct-sell to the public and we go by size, so the larger the pumpkin, the more it costs."

(more)

Merrill says there were a number of factors that contributed to the good growing year.

"We had a number of things. We had a mild spring. We had a lot of rain in June, so we had excellent germination. Then it turned very hot in July, so there are a lot of heat units," she stated.

"Pumpkins require a lot of heat, so those heat units in July and into August really helped contribute to a tremendous crop this year."

There is, however, one downside to a bumper crop in the pumpkin patch at Robertson Valley Farms – some heavy lifting. Merrill says their operation does not use equipment to harvest. Each and every pumpkin is picked by hand and moved to a pile before being loaded onto to a trailer, and then unloaded onto a larger pile indoors.

That's a lot of pumpkin piling – but Merrill says when the crop is as good as it is this year, they don't mind.

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For more information, contact:

Joan Merrill
Robertson Valley Farms
Phone: (306) 382-9544

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NEW MARKETS EMERGE FOR SASKATOON BERRY

Saskatchewan's budding saskatoon berry industry took another step up the ladder this year with the delivery of fresh berries to the European market.

Sandy Purdy, founder of Prairie Berries near the central Saskatchewan community of Keeler, has pioneered new developments in Saskatchewan's fruit industry for years. But 2006 will be remembered for the unprecedented step of packaging and shipping fresh berries to Germany.

"We had a contract to deliver fresh berries into Germany for six weeks," Purdy stated. Her company packaged and shipped Saskatchewan-grown berries onto airplanes twice per week. Although some growing pains limited this year's experiment to four weeks instead of six, she said the door is now open to a new market, as the German broker has indicated he wants to import saskatoon berries again next year.

Despite being the first year that any significant volumes of saskatoons have been shipped to Germany, Purdy says the market has already become somewhat diversified. For example, saskatoon tea proved to be a popular item with German consumers this year.

Although the introduction of Saskatchewan-grown fruit to Germany is a memorable event, the 2006 berry crop was certainly not a record breaker. At best, Purdy says this was an average year for berry production. For producers in some parts of the province, the wet spring – particularly in early June – resulted in some minor fungus outbreaks which reduced overall volumes.

"I wouldn't say it was a great year, but it was a good year," she noted.

Production volumes aside, however, the industry continues to grow, with new producers and expanded orchard acreages coming on stream. Purdy's Prairie Berries operation, for example, enhanced its internal handling capacity and added a colour sorter, which made it possible for her processing plant to handle three times the volume it traditionally accepted.

(more)

By expanding the infrastructure within the industry and adding new markets, Purdy believes the industry is poised to continue on its rapid growth track.

"This is the start of where we need to go," she said of the industry's expansion across the Atlantic.

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For more information, contact:

Sandy Purdy
Prairie Berries
Phone: (306) 788-2018
E-mail: prairieberries@sasktel.net

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U OF S PROFESSOR PIONEERING AGRICULTURAL RESEARCH

Having seen many parts of the world in his academic life, Dr. Peiqiang Yu chose the University of Saskatchewan as the place to build his distinguished career in animal feed research and development.

Today, the professor in the College of Agriculture's Department of Animal and Poultry Science is a highly respected researcher, with over 100 scientific publications to his name and dozens of speaking engagements at national and international conferences.

"I first came here in 2000 doing my federal NSERC (National Sciences and Engineering Research Council) postdoctoral fellowship in the field of animal metabolism and physiology," said Dr. Yu.

He quickly built a reputation for his work, and not long after was named the Chair for Feed Research and Development under the Strategic Research Program (SRP) administered by Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food (SAF).

The SRP is a five-year, $16.5 million program that funds 17 research chairs in areas of strategic importance to the province. The goal of the program is to engage bright minds in agricultural research and development in Saskatchewan, adding value to the province's farm and food industry, improving its competitive position and furthering commercialization opportunities.

Given the importance of the livestock sector to Saskatchewan's overall agricultural economy, Dr. Yu's kind of expertise was a perfect match.

He now leads a research team of seven, studying areas such as feed science, processing and chemistry, ruminant nutrition and nutritional biochemistry. "My research includes two types of research – basic research and applied research," he said.

Basic research is part of Dr. Yu's mandate as an academic, building the body of knowledge in his field of study. For this part of his work, an invaluable tool at his disposal at the University of Saskatchewan is the Canadian Light Source synchrotron.

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"We use the synchrotron for feed nutrition research," he stated. "We can use it to check things like protein change or structural change at the molecular level. Without the synchrotron, we can't do this kind of work."

The device has enabled Dr. Yu and his group to pioneer research in the field of animal feed and nutrition. "We are the only group in Canada to do this work, so it is quite unique. Each time I do a project, I try to find literature from other people who have done similar studies. For many of the types of work I'm doing, I can't find papers. When I get a result, I want to compare it with other people, but there are no published results out there."

Applied research includes the scientific work that is often requested and funded by the agricultural industry or producer groups. "We now have six feed companies that have asked us to help them develop new products or assist them to evaluate the products they have previously developed. These products are then marketed provincially, nationally and internationally. So we help them to investigate and capitalize upon commercialization opportunities," said Dr. Yu.

He offered an example of how his research as an SAF Chair can benefit the average Saskatchewan producer. "We do research to increase the protein availability in feed. Protein digests very fast in ruminants. When we use a certain treatment in the feed, we can reduce the protein degradation in ruminants. So we can do calculations on how various treatments change our results, and we can formulate the ruminants' diet accordingly," he said.

"The result is that we can produce a higher grade of feed, meaning less feed will be required for the same nutritional value, and the producer's feed costs will be reduced."

Dr. Yu's work is a prime example of how industry, government and universities can partner together to advance the entire agricultural sector.

"The government builds a position, then research funding comes from the industry, comes from the provincial funding agency, comes from the federal funding agency," said Dr. Yu. "Without the SAF chair position, I can't do this kind of job. So I think it's a very important and very useful investment for the whole province."

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For more information, contact:

Dr. Peiqiang Yu, Research Professor and SAF Chair for Feed Research and Development
College of Agriculture, University of Saskatchewan
Phone: (306) 966-4132
e-mail: peiqiang.yu@usask.ca

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INTERPROVINCIAL DEAL ON AGRICUTURAL TRADE GOOD NEWS FOR PRODUCERS

A new agreement to improve the trade of agricultural goods among six provinces and territories will be good news for Saskatchewan producers, processors and manufacturers.

Saskatchewan, Alberta, Manitoba, British Columbia, Prince Edward Island and the Yukon all signed on to the pact to liberalize interprovincial agricultural trade.

Although national consensus couldn't be reached among all provinces and territories, the six jurisdictions that formally agreed have shown some leadership in the process that may pave the way for future expansion of the deal to involve other provinces, notably larger jurisdictions like Ontario and Quebec.

Agriculture and Food Minister Mark Wartman signed the agreement on behalf of Saskatchewan. "It is important that, as we continue to work towards harmonization and improved trading relationships internationally, we do what we can to remove barriers in our own market," he said.

The pact stems from the Agreement on Internal Trade (AIT) that aims to remove obstacles to interprovincial trade, promote non-discrimination on goods that travel across provincial boundaries and enhance the right of entry and exit of goods between jurisdictions in Canada.

In 2005, a federal/provincial/territorial committee on agricultural trade policy established a working group to review the Agricultural Chapter of the AIT. A report presented by that group to Canada's Agriculture Ministers in March 2006 led to the agreement in place today.

"When we were unable to reach a full national consensus on the recommendations of the working group in March, we felt it better to move ahead with an interim agreement," Wartman said.

"We will formalize our domestic relationships through the (AIT) over the long term, but in the short term, this agreement allows us to begin that process without needing the full agreement of every province and territory in Confederation," he added.

(more)

"The six supporting provinces and territories will now apply the spirit of the AIT to our agriculture and food goods as we continue to work toward a formal, national agreement on interprovincial trade in agriculture."

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For more information, contact:

Scott Brown, Director, Communications Branch
Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food
Phone: (306) 787-4031

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PROPOSED ORGANIC PRODUCT REGULATIONS OPEN TO PUBLIC COMMENT

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) is calling for comments from interested parties on proposed regulations to govern the use of a federal organic logo and accreditation/certification requirements for organic agricultural products.

According to the CFIA, the purpose of the regulations is to establish a system by which the agency can regulate the use of the "Canada Organic" agricultural product label. The proposed regulations were developed after a process of consultation with stakeholders between 2004 and 2005.

The new regulatory framework would use standards as developed by the Canadian General Standards Board called "Organic Production Systems General Principles and Management Standards." The intent is to create a single Canadian standard for organic products, which would be offered for international recognition in an effort to ensure continued access to export markets, and to provide consistent labeling for the protection of consumers.

Under the new program, existing certification and accreditation bodies would have the opportunity to continue to deliver services by meeting the CFIA's prescribed criteria. In effect, the food inspection agency will accredit the accreditation agencies, which will accredit the certifiers, who, in turn, will ensure that the national standard has been followed.

The proposed new regulations have now been published in the Canada Gazette, which began a 75-day period for comment. That period ends November 16, 2006.

Detailed information, including the actual language of the regulations and a "Regulatory Impact Analysis Statement," are available online through the CFIA website at www.inspection.gc.ca (under "Recent Amendments"), or on the Canada Gazette website at www.canadagazette.gc.ca.

According to the latest statistics available from the Canadian Organic Growers, there are 1,245 certified organic producers in Saskatchewan (representing around 34 per cent of total organic producers in Canada) farming an estimated 720,000 acres of land. There are some 99 certified organic processors and 13 certified handlers and traders of organic products in the province, as well.

(more)

Blaine Recksiedler is the Cereal and Organic Crop Specialist with Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food. He noted that, in terms of the development of regulations for their product, "the organic sector has always felt it is important for their members to be part of the process. Participating in the comment period is an opportunity to continue in that role."

He noted that all comments on the proposed organic products regulations must be submitted in writing to:

Dr. Bashir Manji
Canadian Food Inspection Agency
59 Camelot Drive
Ottawa, ON
K1Y 0Y9
tel: 613-221-7154
fax: 613-221-7294
E-mail: bashirm@inspection.gc.ca

Comments must be received by November 16, 2006.

Recksiedler stressed that, although the new regulations are a federal—not provincial—government process, he would welcome calls from industry stakeholders wishing to discuss the national program.

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For more information, contact:

Media Relations
Canadian Food Inspection Agency
Phone: (613) 228-6682

Blaine Recksiedler, Cereal and Organic Crop Specialist
Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food
Phone: (306) 787-4664